India Seeking it's Diaspora in South Africa: Responses from the South African Indians

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ABSTRACT

Since independence the Government of India chose to follow a policy of disassociation with its Diaspora, continuously giving them advise to adapt to the culture as well as aspirations of their host countries. Many a times the Government of India has not been able to provide the kind of support that the Diaspora needed in the most difficult times. But, all this suddenly changed post-globalization when India adopted a policy of active association towards its Diaspora. This left the Indian Diaspora in general and the Indian Diaspora in South Africa in particular confused. The series of policies and programmes that ensued soon after the change in Diaspora policy like organizing the annual Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas led to a lot of criticism from the South African Indians. With this background, the paper tries to analyse the role of the South African Indians in nation-building in South Africa, the policies of the Indian government to re-engage this diaspora and current challenges that India faces while engaging with its Diaspora in South Africa.

Keywords: *Diaspora, South Africa, Migration, History, Resistance, Indian Diaspora*

Brief History of Indian Migration to South Africa

South Africa, officially the Republic of South Africa, is a country located at the Southern tip of Africa, it is surrounded by Namibia, Botswana in the north and Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Swaziland in the east. South Africa has approximately 1.2 million PIOs. They constitute 2.6 percent of South Africa's population of 45 million. About 72 percent of Indians live in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and they constitute to percent of the state's population. Gauteng is home to 20 percent of the Indian population. The Indians first arrived as 'slaves' (Slavery was the practice of owning an individual with a small amount of money with a legal document of ownership. The slave would not be paid any compensation and would be completely at the mercy of his owner) in 1653 from Bengal and South India, imported by the Dutch East India Company. There were a total number of 1195 Indians which were brought to the Cape from the year 1653 till the early nineteenth century. The influx of Indians was causing a sizable increase in the population also. There was a pressing

need of labourers in sugarcane fields of the Natal region in South Africa during that time. Thus, when the indentured system was adopted by the Britishers, they brought these Indian labourers to Natal who were already skilled in working in sugarcane plantations in India. This led to a huge number of Indians being brought to South Africa to work as indentured labour (Kadekar 2012).

Between 1860 and 1911, some 1,52,184 Indians arrived in South Africa from different parts of India. Of them 62 per cent were men, 25 per cent were women and 13 per cent were children. Around 60 per cent were from the present-day Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh while the rest were from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Kadekar 2009). There have been various sources that have tried to provide a concrete data of the indentured Indians who arrived in South Africa on various ships (Kadekar 2009). The highest percentage of Indian belonged to the Shudra caste (31 percent) second were Vaishyas (21 percent) then there were untouchables, Kshatriyas, Muslims, Christians and the lowest being the Brahmins (Kuper 1960). There are many reasons behind such classification- Shudras belonged to the lowest in the order of the caste system in India and were more than willing to leave their own country in order to ensure good income for their families while Brahmins did not have any such reasons to leave their families and settle in a far away land. This was the reason that there was more number of Shudras and less of Brahmins in the waves of indentured labour that arrived in South Africa.

People of Indian Origin constitute one of the four population segments in South Africa. The other three are Europeans, Africans and the coloured (those of mixed descent). In 2000, the population of PIOs was 10,00,000 (Ministry of External Affairs 2001). The PIOs constituted 2.30 per cent of the country's population. Of these, 50 percent were from Tamil, 20 percent were from Hindi, 20 percent were from Gujarati and 10 percent were from Telugu-speaking areas. Nearly 39 percent were Hindus, 13 percent were Christians and 20 percent were Muslims.

Indian settlers in South Africa had been a separate case for India. Long before Mahatma Gandhi used his tactics of non-cooperation, civil disobedience, satyagraha and peaceful protests in Indian freedom struggles in 1920 he evolved and made maiden use of many of these methods in South Africa in late nineteenth century. The personal experiences that Gandhi had in South Africa like the one where he was thrown out a train despite having a first class ticket encouraged his strong feeling against racial discrimination of Indians in South Africa became a sentimental issue for the followers of Gandhi in Indian freedom

struggles. The racial discrimination of Indians in South Africa received constant condemnation from Indian leaders and the cause of Indians in South Africa always remained high in Indian foreign policy consideration.

Role of South Africa Indians in Nation-Building

The Indians started a long battle for racial equality under the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) in 1894. In that year, he sent a petition to the imperial government with 10,000 signatures against a possible disenfranchisement of Indians in Natal. In the same year, he founded Natal Indian Congress and helped to float the newspaper Indian Opinion from Durban.

Discriminatory treatment in racially structured society of South Africa had drawn Mahatma Gandhi into active politics when he had gone to South Africa in late 19th century. Later Indian nationalists belonging to different ideologies and political groups joined hands and collectively demanded improvement in working and living conditions of Indians settled abroad. Indian settlers protest began to be articulated in East Africa also. East African Indian National Congress, based on model of Indian National Congress was founded in 1914.

In 1907, Indian immigration was restricted by the colonial government in light of the increasing protests in India. Indians were segregated in 'coolie' locations. They were denied mining rights. Gandhiji started Satyagraha against these anti-Indian legislations. During the time Gandhi was in South Africa, the colonial government imposed a series of measures to deprive Indians of elementary rights as they thought that the existence of free Indians would become a threat to the British rule. Therefore, Gandhi started various protests against any such measures and termed it as Satyagraha meaning determined oppositions in a right cause. Some 60,000 workers from mines, sugar and tea plantations and railways participated in the satyagraha. The Smuts-Gandhi agreement that was signed post the Indian Relief Bill of 1914, had provided all the required assurances to the Indians as per the law, was termed as a conclusion "in just manner and with due regard to vested rights".

In 1946, the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill (also referred to as the "Ghetto Act") provided for the compulsory segregation of Indians in Natal. The Natal Indian Congress (NIC) launched satyagraha against this Act. During the campaign between June, 1946 and June, 1948, over 1,000 Indians were arrested. The satyagraha came to an end suddenly in June, 1948, when the National Party defeated Smuts in the general election.

During this time period, the colonial government had already started its policy of segregating the Blacks and the Colored (those of mixed descent). The geographical segregation of different racial classes in the towns and cities in South Africa led to the abhorrent practice of Apartheid. The Indians on a mass-scale participated in the multiracial and anti-apartheid Congress movements. The United Democratic Front was launched on August 20, 1983 to protest against the tricameral parliament and Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses and the Congress of South African Trade Unions backed the movement. Large numbers of Indians along with the South Africans were arrested. Western sanctions led to the shortage of skills and capital and an economic crisis. In 1990, Nelson Mandela was released; bans on political organizations and multi-party negotiations were removed. On April 27, 1994, South Africa's first democratically elected parliament came into being. The first cabinet of Dr. Nelson Mandela had five ministers of Indian origin. In the 1994 elections, most Indians voted for the National Party and in the 1999 elections, they voted for the Democratic Alliance because of fears of affirmative action and escalating crime. But in the 2004 elections, large numbers voted for the ANC due to political stability and decreasing crime (Kadekar 2012).

Diaspora Policy of the Indian Government

India's relationship with its Diaspora has not been something which was constant but it has certainly evolved in time. There was not much interest or concern from the Indian side over the large size migration of Indians to British colonies in the 19th century, what was only talked about was the system of recruiting the Indian indentured labourer. There were many middlemen who were involved in this recruitment, who would sometimes not tell the complete truth about the journey the labourer was going to take. There were many deaths on the sea too due to exhaustion, disease, etc. It was only when Gandhi reached South Africa during one of his ventures, he noticed the conditions of the Indians in South Africa. Gandhi started raising his voice against the Apartheid system and the indentured system. Due to his efforts the issue became an important part of public debates in India until finally the system was abolished.

After Indian independence one would have expected more from India expressing concerns to its Indian brethren abroad, but India has many other internal conflicts to deal with. When Indians abroad were asked to identify their aspirations with those of their host countries, it became evident that Indians were not going to deviate their interests on the diaspora for now. This made the Indian community in many countries distant from their home nations.

The Indian Diaspora that developed during the times of PM Jawaharlal Nehru was outlined in one of the papers on Foreign Policy that was prepared for the Indian National Congress (INC). PM Nehru wrote extensively about the condition of the Indian diaspora in different British colonies as well as other places. He also talked about their aspirations and what kind of expectations India had from them (Dubey 2000, 72). Nehru suggested at one place: *“An Indian who goes to the other countries must co-operate with people of that country and win for himself a position by friendship and service. The Indians should co-operate with Africans and help them, as far as possible and not claim a special position for themselves (Dubey 2000, 73)”*.

The position of the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru was quite clear. He was vocal in addressing the concern of the Indians abroad that they need to give priority to the considerations of the people of host country. He meant that Indian people should always look out for the people of the host countries and should match their aspirations with them. Indians can never be individualistic or demeaning to the people of their host countries. What PM Nehru was worried about was the image of India as a country and he knew that image was to be built first by the Indian settlers abroad (Gopal 1976, 618)”.

This brought us to a policy that displays disengagement from its Diaspora, this disengagement lasted till the early 1990’s. During this period of disengagement, most of the Indian Diaspora had realised the stand of India towards them so they worked hard to assimilate in their host countries with the people of that country. The Indian community in most of the countries have a strong network amongst them but they also have a good reputation among the people of the host countries. Through the 1990s there was also a significant Indian population that started migrating to many developed countries in search of better opportunities and also because of the requirement of skilled workers abroad. There was huge migration in IT sector, finance, academia etc.

The Indian Government also realised the importance of engaging with its ever established and successful diaspora. Therefore, the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora was established that recommended on the inclusion of People of Indian Origin (PIO) and Non-Resident Indians (NRI) within the term Indian Diaspora (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2019). This was a welcoming step by the Indian Government to connect with the worldwide Indian Diaspora particularly to encourage the wealthy NRIs to invest in the Indian market to boost the economy. The establishment of a separate Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) was also a much needed and was achieved in 2005. The MOIA now

takes care of all the diaspora related issues together. One of the most important initiatives taken up by the Indian government to engage with the Indian diaspora has been the annually held Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas (PBD) since 2003 that brings together people of Indian Diaspora from across the world together. The PBDs have also been held in some countries with sizable number of Indian Diaspora for example South Africa. The Pravasi Bharatiya Kendra has also been established to act as hub of Indian Diaspora activities. The Indian Government also granted the Overseas Citizenship of India card in 2006, which serves as a document of citizenship to many of the PIOs who have been born in different parts of the world (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2019). The Ministry has even launched various programmes in order to connect more with the Indian Diaspora like 'Tracing the Roots' programme and 'Know India Program'. The 'Tracing your Roots' programme is aimed at the People of Indian Origin (PIO) whose ancestors left mostly as indentured labourers to work in colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. The Government of India provides this unique opportunity to these PIOs to find out the city, district, village or province in India from where their ancestors had migrated. This gives the PIO a sense of belonging to their home nation. The 'Know India Program' is aimed at PIO youth who were mainly born in their host country and have never visited India. This programme gives opportunity to the PIO youth to know about their country of origin through a detailed tour of the Indian sub-continent and interaction with various officials. This is a very enlightening experience for many of them who would further want to maintain this linkage with their home nations (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.).

The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) had been able to encourage the Diaspora to contribute to their home country with investments in order to boost the economy with the help of the wealthy Diaspora (Varadarajan 2014). But this doesn't mean that India has no intention to provide all the support to the all Diaspora that needs help from its home country. The current government headed by PM Narendra Modi has been very vocal in terms of providing all the help to the Diaspora. The PM has been frequently visiting many countries and has now made it mandatory to address and meet the Indian Diaspora of each country. This has created a lot of goodwill for India and has been able to portray the intentions of the Indian government to productively engage with its diaspora (Mandhana 2014).

All these current initiatives by the Indian Government are completely different from the Diaspora policies followed in the past by leaders like Nehru and Gandhi (Chaturvedi 2005). The ideas of Gandhi that were incorporated in the initial Diaspora Policy of India

were driven from Gandhi's own experiences in South Africa where he focused on the citizenship rights of the Indian community granted by the British colonial government (Chaturvedi 2005). But the whole Diaspora Policy started with the coming in of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government started redefining this old understanding of the Indian Diaspora. First, it went on to become all inclusive of categories like the Non-Resident Indians (NRI) and People of Indian Origin (PIO) and secondly, it aimed to trace the new diaspora as well as the old diaspora. 'New Diaspora' is the one that migrated after post-independence consisting of skilled people, academicians, entrepreneurs mainly, while the 'Old Diaspora' is the one that went as indentured labour diaspora and has been long neglected. This is the diaspora that became all the more difficult for the Indian government to connect with.

South African has the Indian population concentrated in some major cities only like Durban which is hub of South African Indians as almost 48 percent of the South African Indians reside here. This is the city which has large number of Indian Diasporic organisations like Indian Diaspora Council International (IDC), South Africa Hindu Maha Sabha, Ramakrishna Mission, South African Tamil Association, Andhra Pradesh Associations and many others who have been working tirelessly to maintain the Indian cultural identity and work for the benefit of the society. Indian festivals are celebrated with huge pomp and show in South African cities. Indian newspapers are also published and widely distributed. There are many Indian radio channels that are broadcasted. The city also has historical significance as during the Apartheid there were many Indians who had to bear various sanctions by the colonial government in Durban. Durban also has the famous train station where Gandhi boarded the Pietermaritzburg train and was later thrown out of the train because of his colour. This single incident was the reason behind starting of a long movement against racial discrimination by the colonial government. The South African Indians have been able to keep their identity intact at the same time have done their best to assimilate into the South African culture. The historical past of the indentureship also made them mix into certain customs and traditions which are not followed back home in India. In terms of eating habits, majority of them changed like Samosa is a vegetarian snack in India but is a non-vegetarian snack in South Africa. They have developed a new dish called 'bunny chow' which is a hollowed out loaf of white bread filled with Indian spicy mutton curry. However, Bollywood has been instrumental in providing the source for clothes, dances etc.

During the 2010 PBD that was held in Durban, the Minister of Indians Overseas

Vayalar Ravi exhorted PIOs in Africa to strengthen economic ties:

“For Africans of Indian origin, the bonds tying them to the land of their origin have hitherto been social and cultural. In the changing economic paradigm, you must increasingly look at India as a land of economic opportunity”.

South African Indians: Resisting diaspora strategies

The People of Indian Origin in South Africa is a heterogeneous lot and as has been discussed mostly belonged to the ‘old diaspora’ category. The major migration from India to South Africa took place in the 19th century as indentured labourers (Kuper 1960, 1). The migration that took under ‘passenger Indian’ category consisted of traders and businessmen who went from different regions like Gujarat, Kutch to South Africa. These are the two main categories that migrated to South Africa and established themselves quite successfully (Ginwala 1985, 3). Once the indentured labour contract was over, the Indians were given a chance to go back or settle in South Africa. While a large number of Indians came back to India, a lot of them chose to settle in that foreign land. This was partly because of the reason that they did not want to take up the long, dangerous and tiresome journey of the sea and partly because they found better prospects to sustain themselves in this land. Therefore, though now far away from their homeland, these people chose their host country (Bhana and Brain 1990). The Indians who came back however, provided an account of mistreatment meted out to the indentured labourers by the British and requested the Government to stop this contractual labour system. The Indian labourers who settled in South Africa established themselves as trained and skilled agricultural workers, railway workers as well as gardening work. Some of them who were educated enough got clerical jobs in administrative offices of the British. This ensured their place in the British administration.

All this while, the South African Indians who suffered during the Apartheid lost all contacts with their families, friends back home. There was a total disconnect from their home country (Landy, Maharaj and Mainet-Valleix 2004). With a complete change in the Diaspora Policy of the Indian Government in early 2000s, the government left the old practice of disassociation and followed the policy of association with its diaspora. This major change left many South African Indians confused and bewildered. They have had major issues in now reconnecting with their homeland. The South African Indians were also granted citizenship in 1961 and the past has seen incidents of anti-Indian sentiments in the country especially against the privileged or economically stronger Indians (Ramsamy 2007). This has brought out the need for South African Indians to be African enough or to display their affiliations towards the host country.

This is the major reason why the early attempts by the Indian Government to engage with the South African Indian community were outrightly rejected and heavily criticized. Many important scholars and writers in the Indian circle in South Africa went on to express their South Africa more importantly than the Indian one. It created a huge debate within the South African Indian diasporic circle as to how Indians can link themselves symbolically to their home land (Hansen, 2005). People like Fatima Meer, have hated the idea of conducting Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas (PBD) and the Indian government's initiatives to connect with the Indian Diaspora in South Africa. She said:

"[Diaspora] is a word I abhor ... We, Indian South Africans, have had to struggle hard to claim our South Africanness and that is something that we jealously guard. We are not a diaspora of India in South Africa because we claimed South Africa for our own". (Meer 2003)

The problem lies in the dilemma of the South African Indians to have major linkages with its homeland, partly because the reason that they have been ignored in the past and thus have formed their own connect with their African brethren. The Indian community went hand in hand with the Africans in liberation of South Africa and rejection of racial discrimination through policies like Apartheid. The role and contribution that the Indians played in the past has given them a special place in South Africa, that of being the rightful citizens of their host nations. Many of the South African Indians have feared losing this position and status because of their recent connections with the homeland.

On the other hand, there are many who consider this kind of response as overtly dramatic and unnecessary. This is a time when the South African Indian community is able to connect with India as much as they can. This is also a time when they are looking up towards India to recognize them as the successful Indian community abroad. The policies of Indian Government like the PBD has been able to recognize this community for their remarkable contributions in their host country as well as their successful careers despite all the hardships they faced. The present Government in India has also making all the efforts to make the Indian community more and more welcomed and connected to their home country.

Conclusion

Though, the Indian government has been busy announcing various policies for the People of Indian Origin, they should keep it in mind that the identification process itself shouldn't be inconvenient to the Indian Diaspora. For example, the conversion of People of Indian Origin (PIO) cards to Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards adds another paper

work for the Indian Diaspora and leaves a number of them confused about how the process needs to be done. As the PM announced in this PBD that the deadline has been extended, it clearly shows that not many of the PIOs have converted into OCI cards already.

Even though the responses from South African Indians have not been very favourable for Indians at times, still one can deduce that the various initiatives taken by the Government of India to seek out its Diaspora in South Africa have been largely successful in creating this link between India and its diaspora. The initiatives being taken by the Indian government are extremely important for the South African Indians because of the history of Apartheid that the country has witnessed which strained all diplomatic relations with the Indians. Therefore, India is trying its best to seek out its diaspora in South Africa but their efforts are not being received well by the South African Indians who consider their South African identity more important than any other identity.

The policies of the Government of India should be aimed more at protecting and respecting their identity in their host nation before taking any step to reconnect them to their homeland. The Indian government should be more cautious in approaching South African Indians so as not to leave them in a dilemma where they have to compromise their South African identity.

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